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RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

These techniques are designed to help you tone the autonomic nervous system so that you can offset the effects of daily stress. They are also widely used for various anxiety conditions, insomnias and chronic pain syndromes. With daily practice - at least three times a day at first- you can learn to condition a "relaxation response" that you can then summon when needed. The three described are only several of hundreds of variations that have been developed. For all you must start with comfortable stretchable clothes and be willing to take off your shoes.

TEN BREATH ABDOMINAL BREATHING

Proper breathing is an essential component of dance, singing, swimming and many martial arts. If you have been trained in any of these, this technique will come easy. If not, it will take a little more practice because at first you will find that your stomach muscles move in exactly the opposite way!

1. Sit comfortably in a straight-backed chair or on the floor cross-legged ("Indian" style). Loosen your slacks or dress so that you can relax your stomach muscles and let your abdomen drop into "pot-bellied" shape
2. Place both hands, with fingers open palms down on your "pot belly".
3. Breathe normally with a few slightly large breaths and feel which direction your stomach goes with each breath in and each breath out. Most untrained people will feel their stomach move out with each exhalation and in with each inhalation because they are breathing shallowly with their chest.
4. We wish to do just the opposite, to train the abdominal muscles (stomach muscles) to deepen the breathing. With your hands on your stomach, exhale deeply and push in gently while contracting your abdominal muscles.
5. Then inhale deeply while letting your stomach muscles relax and finally push them out a little to a "pot belly" shape.
6. Do this slowly ten times counting on the exhalations. Close your eyes and picture the energy giving oxygen flowing into your body all the way from your nose and mouth deeply through your lungs down into your abdomen. Try to keep your breaths medium sized and slow so as not to hyperventilate and use chest muscles as little as possible.
7. With your tenth exhalation slowly open your eyes and feel the sense of relaxation passing from your abdomen in all directions throughout your body and mind.

PROGRESSIVE MUSCULAR RELAXATION

This technique works a little better for those who carry much muscle tension and find breathing techniques a little difficult. It also works quite nicely done either before or just after the breathing techniques. It is easiest to learn this technique in a recliner with your body more recumbent and definitely with your shoes off.

1. Stretch out in the recliner, arms on the armrest and feet supported by the chair or footrest. Close your eyes gently.
2. Wiggle your toes a little then contract the muscles in them and scrunch them up. Not as hard as you possibly can but enough so that you feel the tension. Hold them that way for a slow count of five and then gradually relax them. As they relax feel a sense of warm energy flowing into them. Let them relax for another slow count of five.
3. Next contract the muscles in the front of your lower legs by pulling your toes toward your head. Do this for a slow count of five like you did with your toes and then relax for another slow count of five as you feel the relaxing warmth flow into your legs.
4. Next contract the muscles in the back of your legs by pointing your toes down to the ground and pulling up on your heels. Do this for a count of five followed by a slow relaxation to a count of five feeling the warmth spread in your legs.
5. Continue the exercise by moving to the front and back of your upper legs (which will also do your buttocks), then your stomach, chest, hands, upper arms, neck and finally your face.
6. Pay special attention to your face, contracting and scrunching your mouth, cheeks and forehead, which carry a great deal of tension, for the count of five. As you relax your face feel the warm energy flow into it and imagine yourself waking slowly from a good night's sleep as you slowly open your eyes.

IMAGERY

This technique can be quite powerful and is close to self hypnosis and works extremely well in conjunction with the previous techniques. It is also often used in psychotherapy in its "Guided Imagery" form for working through traumatic experiences.

1. Assume a relaxed physical position as previously described. Close your eyes and begin a slow induction to deeper relaxation by visualizing your most relaxed setting. For example, in a warm bed with the soft comforter pulled up about you; lying on the beach with the sun warming your body and the waves gently breaking in the background; swinging slowly on a porch swing on a warm summer evening with the fragrance of honeysuckle occasionally wafting over you.
2. With your setting in mind do not jump into it but slowly sink into it. For instance, for the beach scene, slowly step down from the boardwalk to the beach with each step of the stairs feel yourself becoming more and more relaxed until you sink into complete relaxation.
3. Imagery will often lead you into drowsiness and sleep if this is desired; if not, program yourself to start to emerge, or climb back up the steps after 20 or thirty slow medium breaths.

REMEMBER: PRACTICE, PRACTICE, and PRACTICE!